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AUTHOR Taylor, Elizabeth
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ABSTRACT

Problems associated with determining attrition rates and causes of attrition in the Regents External Degree Program of the University of the State of New York were studied. Students were defined as having dropped out of the program if they had not paid their annual records fee (registration fee). Data are provided to compare attrition figures to the total number of active and graduated students. Inactive students were surveyed to determine why they had become inactive and how satisfied they were with the program. In addition, as part of a larger survey (1981 candidate/graduate study), information was collected on characteristics of inactive students, previous education, occupation, and views of selected program policies. In 1982, a survey form was sent to respondents of the 1981 candidate/graduate study to determine how they had progressed in their studies. Active candidates were categorized as those becoming inactive during the last year and those who had graduated during the last year. Finally, in 1983, students were surveyed as they become inactive. The findings of the surveys are summarized, and the most important reasons for being inactive are identified (e.g., finances, time) for students from five college degree programs. (SW)

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Elizabeth Taylor, Ed. D
Institutional Research Office
Regents External Degree Program
5C03 Cultural Education Center
Albany, NY 12230

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A Study of Attrition in the Regents External Degree Program

Elizabeth Taylor, Ed. D.
Institutional Research Office
Regents External Degree Program

Introduction:

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the problems associated with determining attrition rates and causes in an external degree program. The Regents External Degree Program (REX) of the University of the State of New York is the oldest and largest national external degree program in the country. The program currently offers eight degrees: two associate degrees and two baccalaureate degrees in the arts and sciences, two associate degrees in nursing, and baccalaureate degrees in business and nursing. Over 50,000 students are or have been involved in the program since its beginning. About 16,000 are currently active candidates.

The REX program is based on the concept that what a person knows is more important than how or where the knowledge is acquired. Its central mission is to provide an opportunity for earning a college degree to academically able individuals at low cost, regardless of age, place of residence, prior educational credentials, or constraints imposed by occupation. The program implements this mission by offering academic recognition in the form of credit and degrees to students who have demonstrated college-level learning through examinations, college coursework completed through other accredited academic institutions, and/or other approved means.

DEFINING A REX DROPOUT

Most studies of attrition or retention focus on defining who is a dropout, and discovering when a student is most likely to dropout. However, these questions become difficult to answer in an external degree program. REX differs from other more traditional colleges in that it offers no direct instruction. The program does not reside on a traditional campus with faculty or students. Instead, an administrative staff is located in Albany, and faculty and students may be located anywhere in the United States and in some cases overseas.

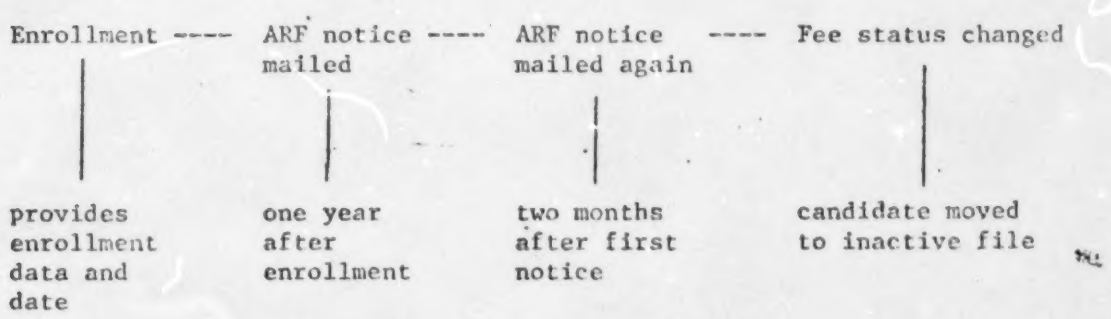
Students may enroll in the program at any time during the year. There are no clear-cut semesters or breaks. The staff in Albany assesses students'

learning on a continuous basis through several means, including the verification of transcripts and the development of tests of college-level learning. Dropping out of the program is not necessarily related to current or previous coursework or test performance. However, dropping out may mean that the services REX offers to its students are not meeting their needs.

For the purposes of program record keeping, students are defined as having dropped out of the program if they have not paid their annual records fee (ARF) within a set amount of time. The annual records fee is similar to a registration fee, and is paid yearly on the anniversary of the student's enrollment. Currently, if the student does not pay within four months, he is recorded as inactive in the computer files, and his records are separated from the other active or graduated students. Prior to 1982, students had an extra year to pay the annual records fee. Thus these earlier students had not paid a fee in two years before their status changed. Using this system, it is impossible to pinpoint when a student becomes inactive. A broad range of time exists when students may have decided to leave the program; we only can determine when they decide not to re-register.

Figure 1 shows this process of going inactive based on non-payment of annual records fees.

Figure 1


Enrollment ---- ARF notice mailed ---- ARF notice mailed again ---- Fee status changed
provides enrollment data and date
one year after enrollment
two months after first notice
candidate moved to inactive file

RATE OF ATTRITION

The rate of attrition is determined on a yearly basis by degree program. Table 1 indicates the attrition pattern compiled over the last eight years. In the table, attrition figures are compared to the total number of active and graduated students for these same years.

TABLE 1

Total Enrollment and Graduation Statistics

Degree Program	Enrolled: Active	%	Enrolled: Inactive	%	Graduated	%	Totals
Associate in Arts (Liberal Arts)	1067	16	1695	25	4084	59	6846
Associate in Science (Liberal Arts)	1659	18	1741	18	6027	64	9427
Associate in Applied Science (Nursing)	1332	27	3025	62	532	11	4889
Associate in Science (Nursing)	2136	41	2097	40	954	18	5187
Bachelor of Science (Nursing)	4544	50	4143	46	397	4	9084
Bachelor of Arts (Liberal Arts)	1442	31	1706	36	1572	33	4720
Bachelor of Science (Liberal Arts)	3429	28	4450	36	4545	36	12,424
Bachelor of Science (Business: Subject Concentration Option)	1368	31	2809	64	179	4	4356
Bachelor of Science (General Business Option)	893	42	993	47	222	11	2108
Regents Credit Bank	372	51	358	49	--	--	730
Totals	18,242	31	23,017	39	18,512	31	59,771

CHARACTERISTICS OF INACTIVE STUDENTS

Information about inactive students was collected in three stages. In the first stage, a sample of inactive candidates was randomly selected from the population of all identified inactive candidates, from the beginning of the program through summer of 1981. Approximately 2500 inactive candidates were mailed a questionnaire asking them why they became inactive, and how satisfied they were with REX. The second stage involved mailing a similar questionnaire to a sample of candidates who were known to have become inactive between 1981 and Fall of 1982. These candidates were also asked why they chose to become inactive, and how satisfied they were with the program.

The third phase involves mailing a questionnaire to candidates as they become inactive. The questionnaires are mailed out on a monthly basis. Again this questionnaire asks candidates why they have become inactive, and how they rate the program.

1981 Candidate/Graduate Study

The sampling of inactive candidates for the 1981 study was part of a larger study called the 1981 Candidate/Graduate Study. For this study, a sample of candidates was selected in May of 1981 from the three types of candidates in REX: actives, inactives and graduates. Active candidates and graduates were selected from 1977 onward; inactive candidates were selected from the entire span of the program. The candidates within these three basic groups were further broken down into five degree program categories: The Associate Degrees in Arts and Sciences, the Associate in Science and the Associate in Applied Science (nursing), the Bachelors Degrees in Arts and Sciences, the Bachelor of Science (nursing), and the Bachelor of Science (business). A systematic sample was drawn from each of these five degree program categories within the three basic groups, creating 15 sample cells. The number of active candidates and graduates sampled was approximately 10%, excluding graduates of the Bachelor of Science in Nursing and Bachelor of Science in Business groups. In those two groups the number of graduates was small so the entire population was used. Approximately 15% - 20% of the inactive population was sampled because a lower response rate was anticipated.

Each inactive student selected for the sample was mailed a four-page questionnaire that contained questions about the candidate himself, previous

education, occupation and views of selected program policies.

Many of the survey forms were undeliverable. This is most probably due to the fact that the addresses were at least two years old. Addresses of inactive students are not updated. The overall response rate of those forms that were deliverable was 27%, varying from 19% for Business Degree students to 32% for Baccalaureate Nursing Degree students.

The characteristics of inactive respondents did not vary greatly from active or graduate respondents, or from the sample as a whole. One exception was gender. Although males and females comprise equal percentages of the active and inactive students, the groups differ for graduates. In the graduate population, 81% are men and 19% are women. Also, graduates are more likely to be on active military duty. Inactive candidates did not differ greatly in occupation or educational background from actives or graduates either. Most held a job in the professional/technical area, and had completed some college prior to enrolling.

In the 1981 study, inactive candidates were asked several questions that dealt specifically with becoming inactive, as well as questions about education and occupation. The results of these statements are summarized in Table 2. No reason stands out as being selected by all groups, The statement "Could not earn the credit I expected for my life or work experience" earned a proportionately high rating, as did the statements, "Decided to attend another institution", "Could not continue due to sickness, accident, or life crisis", and "Not enough time to study and work at the same time." A relatively large proportion of the Bachelor of Science in Nursing candidates chose "Could not transfer all the credits I expected for course-work from the schools I attended" though almost none of the Associate degree nursing candidates rated this as important.

Inactive candidates were also asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of positively worded statements about the program. As in the survey form for active candidates, the questions were divided into four categories: written materials, advising, examinations and opinions. Inactive candidates generally had a higher rate of "Don't Know/Never Use" responses to these statements. Again, candidates in the nursing programs were more familiar with the examinations, and were generally satisfied with their content. Inactive nursing candidates did have a higher rate of dissatisfaction with the study guides and with information provided upon test failure.

TABLE 2

Most Important Reason for Becoming Inactive

	AA/AS %	ADN %	BA/BS %	BSN %	BBUS %
Most important reason for becoming inactive					
No response	22	29	21	21	33
Could not earn the credit I expected for my life or work experience.	12	4	10	10	11
Had too many problems with the program.	5	8	7	5	5
Degree requirements were more difficult than I anticipated.	1	--	4	3	--
Had to make too many decisions by myself about my academic program.	1	2	4	3	3
Decided that I disliked studying independently.	--	2	1	3	2
Could not transfer all the credits I expected for course-work from the schools I attended.	1	--	5	13	3
Just wanted to get a transcript with all my credits on it.	3	--	--	--	--
Decided I didn't want or need a college degree.	--	--	2	1	--
Decided to attend another institution.	11	4	4	9	5
Failed examinations and/or courses.	1	4	2	--	--
Wanted more contact with other students.	--	--	--	1	--
Not enough money to pay for records fees, courses and/or examinations.	8	8	7	5	6

-continued-

TABLE 2 (continued)

	AA/AS %	ADN %	BA/BS %	BSN %	BBUS %
Most important reason for becoming inactive					
Was unable to get sufficient financial aid.	--	3	--	--	3
Could not continue due to sickness, accident or life crisis.	3	11	6	3	2
Not enough time to study and work at the same time.	11	1	4	7	8
Not enough time to study and meet my family committments.	1	4	4	2	3
Other	20	18	21	15	17

Inactive candidates in general had a gigher disagreement rate on the opinion questions. Although they did not receive as many questions, they generally had disagreement rates of about 20% - 30%, compared to rates of 10% - 15% for active candidates.

1982 Follow-up

In the Fall of 1982 a survey form was sent to respondents to the 1981 survey to see how they had progressed in their studies. All respondents to the 1981 survey who were active in the program at that time were used in the sample. The active candidates were broken down into three groups: those who became inactive during the last year, and those who graduated during the last year. Each of these groups was again broken down into five degree program components.

A total of 206 candidates who had become inactive responded to the survey. Their responses were compared to inactive candidates in 1981. Nine of the most frequently chosen reasons for becoming inactive by candidates responding to the 1981 survey were included on the 1982 survey form. The responses of each group to those reasons are listed in Table 3. As can be seen, the most important reason listed by the 1982 inactives becoming inactive were lack of money.

TABLE 3

Comparison of 1981 and 1982 Inactives:

Most Important Reasons for Becoming Inactive

	1981 Inactives (n=428) %	1982 Inactives (n=206) %
Could not earn the credit I expected for my work or life experience	9	6
Had too many problems with the program (e.g., poor advisement, delays in receiving materials, etc.)	6	9
Had to make too many decisions by myself about my academic program	3	1
Could not transfer all the credits I expected from the schools I attended	5	9
Decided to attend another institution	7	9
Not enough money to pay for fees, courses, and/or examinations	7	27
Not enough time to study and work at the same time	6	6
Not enough time to study and meet my family commitments	3	2
Other	16	22

As in 1981, the candidates who became inactive in 1982 tended to have a higher disagreement rate on opinion questions than candidates who had remained active or graduated.

1983 Study of Inactives

In 1983 it was decided that it would be appropriate to survey students as they became inactive. Thus beginning in March surveys were sent each month to students right after their fee status changed. These surveys contained

questions that were similar to those used in the 1981 Candidate/Graduate survey and its 1982 follow-up.

The responses to these surveys are summarized here for March through September. Overall, 27% of the students (658) have responded to the survey so far. Unlike the previous surveys, only 9% of the surveys were undeliverable.

The characteristics of these newly inactive students are similar to the previous two groups. Twenty-nine percent view themselves as only temporarily inactive, while another 27% plan to re-enroll sometime in the future. Only 16% do not plan to obtain a degree through REX. Most of these inactive students are not enrolled in another college or university (55%). However, many plan eventually to obtain at least a baccalaureate degree (32%).

As with all REX students, the large majority are employed (86%). The largest number work in a professional/technical area (30%) or a service occupation (24%). The percentages are similar to those obtained from other surveys of REX students.

These new inactive candidates tended to disagree with the statements about the program more frequently than actives or graduates. Inactives in the nursing program were more likely to think that the current fee structure is inappropriate. This most probably reflects the fact that some Nursing examinations are expensive. Inactives in the Business Degree Program were more likely to think that the program did not apply many of their previously earned credits to their degree requirements as they expected. As a whole, more of these inactives also disagreed with the statement that the degree requirements were flexible enough to meet their needs than previous groups of inactives.

As with the other groups of inactives, these inactives were asked why they decided to become inactive. Their responses are summarized in Table 4. Students could choose more than one reason for becoming inactive. Again, many candidates stated that they did not have enough money to pay for records fees, courses or examinations. Several of these students stated that they had changed their priorities and did not budget money for these expenses. Many of the 1982 inactives also felt that they did not have enough time to study and work at the same time.

TABLE 4

1983 Inactives: Reasons for Becoming Inactive

	Nursing Degree Program (n=291) %	Business Degree Program (n=87) %	Arts & Sciences (n=280) %
Could not earn the credit I expected for my life or work experiences	15	17	20
Had too many problems with the program	15	16	21
Had to make too many decisions by myself about my academic program	12	8	9
Could not transfer all the credits I expected for coursework for the schools I attended	16	23	26
Decided to attend another institution	18	17	15
Not enough money to pay for records fees, courses, and/or examinations	46	32	31
Not enough time to study and work at the same time	22	25	23
Not enough time to study and and meet my family commitments	19	20	15
Requirements were too inflexible	--	10	--
Found examinations too difficult	16	8	--
Graduate school would not admit me if I graduated from your program	3	--	--
State I live in would not let me take state boards as a graduate of REX	2	--	--
Other	51	43	42